The JFK files—and our loss of innocence

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WASHINGTON — The most striking impression gained from plowing through 40,000 pages of the FBI's raw files on the investigation into the assassination of John F. Kennedy is that not much of real significance has been added to our store of knowledge that was not known in the first few nightmarish hours after the Kennedy shooting.

Despite the exhaustive FBI probe and numberless other public and privately sponsored investigations carried on over the 14 years since then, an official today would be hard-pressed to go beyond the bare-bones assessment made only hours after the assassination by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in a memo for his file: ". . . I thought very probably we had in custody the man who killed the President in Dallas, but this had not definitely been established. I advised Mr. Schlel (an assistant attorney general) that Lee Harvey Oswald spent some years in Russia, although he was born in America; that he tried unsuccessfully to renounce American citizenship, and then came back here."

CAPITOL STUFF

Hoover described Oswald as "an extreme radical of the left" and mentioned his connection with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, then added: ". . . our agents view him as a nut as he freezes up and withdraws into himself when he is being questioned as he did this afternoon down in Dallas."

Almost from the first, Hoover believed Oswald to be the lone gunman, but he was skeptical about ruling out the possibility of a wider conspiracy, perhaps involving a Cuban connection. Chances are that he had not been informed (at least not officially) of earlier CIA attempts to kill Fidel Castro, at one point with the agency even seeking help from Mafia hit men. But Attorney General Robert Kennedy knew, and supposedly sanctioned the efforts; thus the President's brother must have been shattered when Hoover told him only a few hours after the assassination that there was speculation that Oswald might have been acting in league with the Cubans.

One is struck by the mind-boggling thoroughness of the FBI's vacuum cleaner-type investigation. No lead was too fuzzy or far-out for the FBI to pursue. Agents scurried across the country running down rumors, hints, guesses and suspicions, however remote, from ordinary citizens, law enforcement agencies, mind readers and screwballs.

Telephone operators who overheard snatches of conversation in a "foreign tongue that may have been Russian" about the time of the assassination were painstakingly interviewed, as were tipsters who suspected neighbors of harboring anti-American sentiments or hatred of President Kennedy or members of his family. Along with that, the files reflect the superb, meticulous work for which the bureau is noted as agents tracked Oswald's movements and probed his background and hunted down such physical evidence as the dim origins of Oswald's cheap Italian rifle, the ammunition it used, and the weapon's custom-made sling.

The overall mass of documents and memos bares the indelible imprint of Hoover, then at the height of his legendary career, as he personally directed the probe with scribbled "check this" notations on reports and lengthy personal memoranda containing detailed criticisms of past performance and directions for the future. It was a trying time for Hoover. He was fending off critics who wondered aloud why the bureau did not keep closer tabs on known defectors like Oswald, and he engaged in bitter infighting with other concerned agencies — the CIA, the Secret Service, and the Dallas police — all of whom were anxious to shift the blame for the various blunders that marked the assassination and its aftermath.

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Perhaps one measure of the searing impression the Kennedy assassination had on the national consciousness is that, even after 14 years, so much of the grist of the investigative file remains so fresh in mind. Details of Oswald's past leap readily to mind — from his lonely and alienated childhood, as reflected in his New York City juvenile court record, to his bitter defection from the U.S. Marine Corps to the Soviet Union and his sour return home.

But there is one real shocker in store for those reading the file — the stunning realization that America and Americans have changed drastically since 1963. John F. Kennedy presided over the twilight of a relative age of innocence, before the political assassinations, the urban riots, Vietnam and the disclosures of official lawlessness by Richard Nixon, the CIA, FBI and other intelligence agencies jolted the country into the state of peevish cynicism that dampens the national spirit today.

As a sample of what we have lost in the process, here is a letter to Hoover from a Mrs. Alice Sorbo of Los Angeles, dated Nov. 23, 1963: "I know you will find out who murdered our wonderful President. Only you and your wonderful staff can do this. I pray for you all."

schlel = Norbert Schlei